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**The Music of Organising:** Exploring  
Aesthetic Ethnography

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## **ABSTRACT**

Through a discussion of Ingarden's phenomenology, this paper proposes an aesthetic ethnographic methodology. Aesthetic ethnography enables the researcher to view organisations as if they are works of art. This involves observing the continual oscillation between order and chaos, a quality Schiller terms as the play impulse. The shifts in focus from naïve outsider (Emotional Attachment) to critical insider (Cognitive Detachment) and then to informed outsider (Integrated Synthesis) are explored, followed by a case study of a symphony orchestra undergoing governance change.

*‘In business you have politics but in arts companies you have blood on the floor!’*

This blunt statement came at the end of an interview I was conducting as part of research for my doctoral studies. It gave me much pause for thought, because it succinctly described some of the things I was observing while conducting research into my selected organisation: a symphony orchestra. I had become baffled by the incongruities I was experiencing. Here was an organisation engaged in the sublime mission of recreating music from the vast canon of orchestral works, verging on self destruction through an internal struggle for control.

As a budding management theorist and organisational scholar, I was confronted with the challenge of making sense of paradoxes and incongruities within the organisation. My quest for clarity and understanding mirrors theoretical developments in organisational studies over recent decades that explore the ambiguous and uncertain environments within which enterprises exist.

One research trajectory has been to see organisations as processes rather than static forms. In this regard, Karl Weick notes that to understand the dynamic environment within which managers work, researchers need to be alert to an organisation’s ‘*generative settings*’ (Weick, 2004, p. 664, emphasis added); an existential perspective of organisational life. He considers elements such as evolution, ambivalence, and complexity to be necessary prerequisites for appreciating process (Weick, 2004). In order to locate exemplars that illustrate this orientation, Weick and his colleagues propose that sport is an apt forum. For them, sport ‘thrives on verbs and images’; and questions like, “‘what are people doing?’” and “‘what is going on?’” (Wolfe et al., 2005, p. 205), tease out this vibrancy.

Another alternative has been to focus on the symbolic. Henry Mintzberg, in his reflections on organisational strategy, follows an art-making route, deploying the craft of pottery (Mintzberg, 1987) as a preferred metaphor.

Several years prior to these metaphoric musings, in 1985, Mintzberg and Westley wrote a short but paper entitled ‘Spinning on symbolism: Imagining strategy’ where they advocate a symbolic view of a field that has traditionally relied on quantifiable data. Here they take the notion of strategy beyond its scientific roots and postulate an aesthetic perspective – strategy as an *experience*. Profundity, they suggest, is not found in the rigorous application of concepts and principles, but rather through the imagination. In making this claim they ask: ‘Can we say that organizations rich in tangible imagery are more inclined to pursue more

profound, creative, individualistic strategies, while those poor in such imagery will pursue superficial banal strategies?’ (Mintzberg & Westley, 1985, p. 63).

Underpinning Mintzberg’s disquiet is that the instrumental focus has its weaknesses and that strategy is as much an art as a science (Mintzberg, 1987). He argues that traditional methods of producing so-called *hard* data, distorts strategic thinking by removing ‘random noise, gossip, inference, impression, and fact’ (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 258) from the frame.

Almost two decades after their symbolism article, Mintzberg and Westley produced another piece in like vein, that advocates an artistic attitude towards planning (Mintzberg & Westley, 2001). This kind of intuitive disposition to organisational leadership is finding an audience in the academy that values intuition as an important compliment to rationality (Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2004).

These moves in organisational research which embrace process and symbol are gaining a formal home in the organisational aesthetics movement. Although aesthetics is a philosophical tradition that reaches back to the Enlightenment, with antecedents in Greek antiquity, its entrance into organisational studies is only recent. Seminal works such as Antonio Strati’s ‘Aesthetic understanding of organizational life’ (Strati, 1992) and Pasquale Gagliardi’s ‘Exploring the aesthetic side of organizational life’ (Gagliardi, 1996) have provided a stimulus for researchers to extend existing methods. They argue that the ephemeral and ineffable can be known, and that the aesthetic lens offers ways in which these indeterminate features can be explored.

Further developments in the field have been strengthened by Pierre Guillet de Monthoux in his aesthetic analysis of arts organisations (Guillet de Monthoux, 2004), and Steve Taylor’s use of aesthetics as a research tool (Taylor, 2002). In this paper I seek to contribute to these methods by offering an analysis of an organisation following this aesthetic turn. First, though, I will scope recent developments within the field.

## **AESTHETICS AND ORGANISATIONAL RESEARCH**

Aesthetics can be defined as ‘sense perception’ (Williams, 1983, p. 31) and necessarily relies on an empathy developing between the researcher and researched. Rather than seeing this as fixed and lineal with the researcher deriving objective data from the research subject, an empathic connection is fluid and active.

To explain this dynamism, Guillet de Monthoux deploys the Schillerian concept of play (*schwung*). For Schiller, *schwung* is more than a swing *from* one state *to* another; instead, it is a continual oscillation between states (Guillet de Monthoux, 2004, p. 20).

Schiller considered art-making to occur in a zone somewhere between baroque *product* and classical *production* (Benjamin, 1998, p. 82). This space acknowledges a continual oscillation between the finished outcome *and* the process by which that item comes into existence. Consequently, for Schiller, underpinning aesthetics is a *play impulse*, where lineal *and* qualitative time; being *and* becoming, continually interact. Schiller writes that ‘this play impulse would aim at the extinction of time *in time* and the reconciliation of becoming with absolute being, of variation with identity’ (Schiller, 1795/1965, p. 74, emphasis in the original).

Therefore, Schiller’s philosophy of aesthetics is paradoxical, requiring an ability to hold together perceptions that are both fixed and fluid; the parts and the whole; and lineal temporality and timelessness. In summary, for Schiller, aesthetic perception moves back and forth between poles in a continual state of *schwung* (Guillet de Monthoux, 2000; 2004, p. 18) where elements cohere as a ‘paradoxical co-presence’ (Hepburn, 2002, p. 27) in a dynamic relationship.

This is an important aesthetic concept because it enables meaning to be continually negotiated between the research subject and the researcher by not presuming a unitary lineal shift *from* the subject *to* an objective view. Rather, the two are in a co-equal fluid relationship with each informing the other.

Further, aesthetic research acknowledges that there is an ‘empathic space’ (Tamisari, 2000, p. 274) that is explored as the researcher becomes part of the world of the researched. A potent metaphor that explains this is to think of ‘a musical *conversation* between performing jazz musicians ... in which the identity of the self as well as the other is *jointly* explored’ (Humphreys, Brown, & Hatch, 2003, pp. 6 & 10, emphasis added).

Similarly, Strati favours this notion by arguing that empathy allows for

the researcher’s self-immersion in the role of the Other and the activation of his/her sensory and aesthetic faculties in order to gather qualitatively rich data

from self-observation, intuition, analogy, relived experience and, often, description.

(Strati, 1999, p. 73)

For Strati, it is this empathic relationship between the researcher and researched that allows for the continual self-reflection and negotiation of meaning that eventually leads to theory development. Reflection and continual renegotiation, though, necessitate a change in thinking to a poly-temporal orientation which is sensitive to process.

In order for researchers to engage empathically, both Strati and Gagliardi advocate for ethnography as a preferred method. Ethnography offers researchers *time* for thinking to develop and for insights to be gained. Strati considers that ethnography gives time for socialisation to take place so that the researcher eventually can ‘see matters from the insiders’ point of view’ (Strati, 1999, p. 65). Similarly for Gagliardi, ethnography offers the researcher time both ‘to “give a name” to our sensations’ and then ‘translat[e] one’s sensations into thoughts’ (Gagliardi, 1996, p. 577).

However, taking this empathic line poses a problem. Can the fleeting and indescribable be systematised into a research method? Furthermore, how can the researcher maintain enough of a distance in order to generalise and theorise while at the same time remain empathically involved in the site to become aware of elements that are not immediately visible?

Stephen Linstead addresses this latter problem by posing an aesthetic solution. He returns to the art of poetry because it offers ‘an intermediary code; a means of switching between codes, particularly between the interiority of the personal and the exteriority of the analytic’ (Linstead, 1999, p. 87). Taking this line, if the strategies we use to read poetry acts as a device to interface between the self and the Other, could this be formalised into a particularly *aesthetic ethnography* that offers a process where personal experience is acknowledged and theory building can be explored?

To address this question I turn to phenomenology for it is within this tradition that aesthetic research can reconcile idiosyncratic sensate responses with a specific method. In particular I explore the work of the Polish aesthetician and phenomenologist, Roman Ingarden (1893–1970).

## AESTHETICS AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Although a pupil of Husserl, Ingarden turned away from Husserl's transcendental approach to embrace what Embree calls 'realistic phenomenology' (Embree, 1997, n.p.). Thus Ingarden's focus was primarily ontological, and he questions the nature of objects and our experiences of those objects. Much of his aesthetic writings that have been translated into English are on literature. For instance, his opus magnum entitled *The literary work of art* (1931/1973), is an exploration of the phenomenology of language. However, he also sought to understand the nature of music in *The work of music and the problem of its identity* (1986).

Through explorations into language and music, Ingarden questions the nature of reality. He grounds his thinking in existing phenomena (for instance individual words and musical sounds), and deals with human actions and motives that result from attending to those phenomena. His notion that art, and music in particular, is grounded firmly in the present, translates well into organisational research.

Ingarden sees works of art as living phenomena containing elements that can be singled out for analysis; and by scrutinising the individual components that comprise the work, a dynamic relationship is established between the perceiver and perceived.

In order to distinguish between an idiosyncratic experience and the generic meanings that these experiences imply, Ingarden uses the terms *real* and *ideal*. By *real* he means a particular work of human creation: 'products of the social life – those of the economy (e.g., currency), political life (e.g., state institutions), those of intellectual life (all products of scientific investigations)' (Ingarden, 1986, p. 57), with all its unique features and flaws. However, an *ideal* object is 'ontically independent of any cognitive act directed at it' (Ingarden, 1931/1973, p. 10), and in so being, possesses generalisable characteristics which are timeless and not subject to change.

In this regard, Ingarden notes that for aesthetic knowledge to become objectified (*idealised*), the perceiver seeks to create neutral properties – or an 'axiologically neutral skeleton' (Ingarden, 1964, p. 207) – that give *voice* to a work of art. Ingarden turns this notion of neutrality back onto the work of art, claiming that it is this that gives an individual piece its unique identity.



Therefore, Ingarden contends, the process of engagement is far from linear. Rather, there is a dynamic interplay between the real and the ideal with the ideal informing the real and vice versa. Figure 1 is a graphic description of this continuous interplay between the real and ideal. This figure is circular with dynamic arrows showing the interrelationship between idiosyncratic phenomena and the generic meanings that derive from those events.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Ingarden maintains that aesthetic responses change and develop as new information is discovered about the object of perception. When approaching a new work we begin with a naïve reading and then, as we begin to notice new things, our awareness becomes gradually more informed. These changes in perception, Ingarden claims, are stimulated by ‘moment[s]’ of insight (Ingarden, 1961, p. 296) that shift the perceiver to new levels of awareness. How, though, do these moments relate to one another?

To clarify this process, in this paper I choose the word *movement* over moment. This preference for movement is that it encapsulates the temporal element of musical aesthetics and focuses on the concept of process noted in the introduction. Temporality implies that the researcher, who may indeed have ‘conviction moments’ (Ingarden, 1961, p. 312), also has a developing cognitive awareness, occurring over periods of gestation.

My use of the word *movement*, then, is multi-layered. First, it carries with it the idea of journey; of movement from one state to another where the researcher gradually uncovers layers of meaning and develops an increasingly deeper understanding of the research site.

Second, the word also resonates with musical form where a *movement* is an entire section of music with its own unique characteristics, but is part of a larger work such as a symphony, concerto or sonata. In this case, each movement, or step, aligns itself with the aesthetic research process and begins with *Emotional Attachment*, moves to *Cognitive Detachment* and concludes with *Integrated Synthesis*. With each movement the researcher becomes more intimately acquainted with the organisation and as a result is increasingly able to make evaluative judgements. Through the process the researcher changes from self absorption (an *I* focus), to a consideration of the context (a *you* focus), and finally to an inclusive empathic co-creative orientation (a *we* focus).

Third, although for ease of description I have explained this notion of movement as a lineal progression, in practice the process is not so tidy. Another layer of meaning, then, is inherent in the word in that it embraces backward and forward reflexivity – continual *movement* that shuttles between the present and the past, while anticipating the future. The researcher, in taking this approach, moves among three areas of focus – I, you, we –continually revisiting his or her perceptions in the light of new experiences and events, resulting in new re-descriptions of experiences.

### **First Ethnographic Movement: Emotional Attachment**

When experiencing a work of art for the first time, the perceiver experiences a number of sensations. Feelings like fascination, wonder, awe, mystery, shock, discomfort, can all occur during first encounters.

Aesthetic ethnography begins with this same sense of wonder in seeing the group being researched as ‘exceptional and unique’ (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 2). At this early stage of field work, there is an initial arresting *emotional attachment*, and the aim is to experience as much of the organisation as possible. Although because of unfamiliarity, certain elements of the site may be at first overlooked; the ethnographer develops an insatiable appetite for more, hoping to become alert to hidden elements. The enterprise charms us, drawing us into itself so that ‘we feel only that it has allured us to itself, impelled us to give attention to it, to possess it in a direct, intuitive contact’ (Ingarden, 1961, p. 296). However, much of our emotional experience is still in germinal form and we desire to sate ourselves in order to ‘consolidate the possession of it’ (Ingarden, 1961, p. 296).

During this movement of emotional attachment, the researcher is self-conscious; and feelings and perceptions bombard him or her to the point of overload. There is little engagement, though, with the sensations and perceptions of the subjects, instead at this stage the researcher is caught up with the two questions: ‘How to *I* feel and what do *I* see and hear?’

This movement begins with a naïve ‘reading’ (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 149) of the environment where the researcher tries to take in as much of the gestalt of the organisation as possible. However, observation must at some point give way to interpretation and the ethnographer’s task is to not only observe but also ‘to decode human experience – to move from unstructured observations to discover the underlying meanings behind behaviour; to

understand feelings and intentions in order to deduce logical implications for strategic decisions' (Mariampolski, 1999, p. 78).

## **Second Ethnographic Movement: Cognitive Detachment**

In the shift from naïve spectator to *cognitive detachment*, the researcher takes on a new analytical guise. Here the ethnographer is concerned with structural issues (Schwartzman, 1993, p. 4) and penetrates beyond surface phenomena into the various layers of the organisation holding them up for critical examination.

This illustrates that aesthetic ways of knowing differ from scientific methodologies in that they seek for multiplicity rather than parsimony. Aesthetic inquiry is based on the expectation that the greater the contradictions and paradoxes, the more interesting and intriguing the research process. Furthermore, where a scientific approach seeks for distance and objectivity, aesthetics sees the researcher and researched intimately and empathically involved. Cognitive detachment, then, does not imply an objective state totally divorced from the research subject, but rather involves an intense search for the elements of the site that are not immediately obvious.

Ingarden notes that what propels us into this cognitive stage is that we either notice some deficiencies in the site that 'calls to be filled' (Ingarden, 1961, p. 302) or new details emerge that invite further, closer examination. Out of this more detailed analysis something new begins to emerge, and Ingarden thinks of this development as examining *categorical structures* and *qualitative harmonising structures*.

By **categorical structures**, Ingarden means that there is an interpretive shift from seeing elements in isolation to conferring on these elements existential meaning. In organisational research, this includes analyses of particular symbols, documents, reports, interviews and direct observations. The aesthetic lens enables these components to be viewed as a *meaning set*.

Here the researcher exegetes phenomena by getting behind what is evident and examines authorial intent, and the socio-political context within which the phenomena were generated. This exegetical process focuses on the rhetorical mores of the time of a work's creation and brings phenomena into sharp elements from the environment 'out of which it arose' (Iser, 1989, p. 244).

In the organisational context, the researcher addresses specific textual cues from the actor's view. For instance, to elicit this information, the researcher focuses on the perceptions and sensations of the subjects ('what do *you* see and hear?' what do *you* feel?') and extends to questions like: 'What happened?' 'How did you feel about that?' 'What was said?' 'How was it said?' 'Who said it?' 'What is their status and relationship with the entire enterprise?' 'What is your perception of what happened?'

This, then, brings into focus the second element of cognitive activity where individual concepts cohere into a whole. For Ingarden this second notion of **qualitative harmony structures** indicates that structural qualities do not remain as isolated, individual elements, but rather constellate and 'become harmonized into a single whole' (Ingarden, 1961, p. 305). Elements, then, lose their individuality and combine together producing something new, and as they lose their 'peculiarity and independence . . . a reciprocal modification of the coexisting qualities may lead to the appearance of an entirely new quality' (Ingarden, 1961, p. 305). In this way the individual parts establish a qualitative relationship within the organisation in its entirety.

Within the research milieu this involves a dialogue with phenomena and an 'interpretation [that] permeates every activity, with the researcher considering [wider] social, cultural and gender implications' (Dowling, 2004, p. 36). This hermeneutic activity moves the researcher beyond his or her initial experiences and asks 'what does it mean?' (Geanellos, 2000, p. 114). In this regard perceptual questions determining what the subject *sees* and *hears* go beyond surface inquiry. Here perception implies a deeper inquiry into meaning-making that asks about the subject's interpretation of phenomena. Ultimately, though, the researcher moves beyond this form of analysis to integrating both his or her perceptions with those of the research subjects.

### **Third Ethnographic Movement: Integrated Synthesis**

The move to *integrated synthesis* brings the perceiver back to the original emotionally charged feelings of the naïve inquirer, only now informed by critical analysis. This final movement, then, does not lead to cynical disengagement, but rather provides a springboard for the perceiver to communicate his or her understanding of the organisation to others whereby they too can 'share these values'(Ingarden, 1961, p. 268). The questions asked in

this stage, ‘what do *we* see and hear?’ what do *we* feel?’ are designed to build a community of knowledge around what the aesthetic responses of the previous movements.

In the process of synthesising discoveries we ‘experience *a centre of crystallization*’ (Ingarden, 1961, p. 300, italics in the original) where in the organisational context, the enterprise takes on new significance. We see it as a whole again and seek to further enlarge our understanding of it. In a sense it is the critical analysis that has gone before that gives a wider appreciation of its value. For Ingarden, ‘this process is characterized by a peculiar *searching disquietude*, a changeability full of dynamism’ (Ingarden, 1961, p. 307, italics in the original). Here the challenges and provocations of the work of art are taken seriously with the possibility of social change occurring.

Similarly, within the organisational context, judgements are made about the enterprise’s fitness in terms of its functionality and the purposes for which it exists. Questions are asked surrounding the organisation’s social function and evaluations made on ‘moral, ethical, and political grounds’ (Richards, 2004, p. 272). The ethnographer observes how it coheres together and recognises that his or her thinking, and possibly even world-view, has changed as a result of the investigation, and ultimately the researcher and the researched experience a transformative relationship.

In summary this schema represents a journey from being an outsider and distant naïve spectator, where the researcher is fully alert to multiple experiences, to an insider with an informed position, and finally to an educated outsider where evaluative judgements are made and findings are narrated. How, though, does this schema translate into the practical application of organisational research?

In what follows I take an arts organisation – a symphony orchestra – as an exemplar and illustrate how this empathic approach can be explored methodologically. To do so I discuss the dynamics of City Symphony Orchestra (a pseudonym) through a period of structural change. What makes this study fascinating is that the City Symphony Orchestra (CSO) is a cooperative enterprise, managed by the full cohort of 68 core musicians. This means that its leader, the Secretary of the Society, is also a musician within the orchestra – a rank-and-file musician on-stage, subject to all the systemic controls that orchestras operate under, and yet off-stage, act as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Under this regime, the lines of accountability are confused with the conductor being answerable to one of the musicians of

the ensemble. Making sense of this on-stage/off-stage dialectic became the focus of my research.

### **RESEARCHING A SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**

In this section I present a case study of a symphony orchestra, the City Symphony (a pseudonym), during a time of structural change. The value of this choice of research subject is that symphony orchestras straddle a number of disciplines. They are at once cutting-edge creative enterprises; hierarchical monoliths; heterogeneous groupings of people with diverse experiences; and corporate edifices. Hence orchestras are complex organisations (Faulkner, 1973; Lehman, 1995) which represent *both* the thrill of creative endeavour *and* expressions of modern management structures. Therefore an orchestra encapsulates the play impulse where fixed hierarchical relationships are mitigated by creative exploration; a mix of ordered rationality, and that which is 'subjective, qualitative, emotive and disordered' (Montuori, 2003, p. 248).

My ethnographic research of the City Symphony fell in two years from 2003 to 2005, covering over 200 hours of observations, interviews, rehearsal and concert attendance. During the process I kept a field-note diary in which I transcribed the content of meetings and individual exchanges, and a field journal which included descriptions of my developing thinking, and reflections on the process as it progressed.

Writing ethnographies is a complex art that requires findings to be reported in an informative yet engaging way. Van Maanen (1987) frames the problems of ethnographic writing around the dual elements of content and style. Aesthetic ethnography also considers this challenge but with an added temporal dimension. Rather than taking a lineal approach to the narrative, aesthetic ethnographic reporting relies on 'backward reflexivity' (Ingarden, 1986, pp. 72 & 77; Moore, 1996) where the present is informed by past events and anticipates the future.

A further issue of writing ethnographies is to determine the degree to which the ethnographer is present to the text and how much his or her identity is interpolated into the unfolding narrative (Alsup, 2004). While my personal story has little to do with the City Symphony, it is important to note that I have been a music teacher, conductor, and orchestral musician. Therefore my place as a researcher straddles both being an outsider and informed insider. I have experienced the vicissitudes of orchestral life and am aware of the protocols of orchestral behaviour, yet I came to the City Symphony as an outsider without a history in that

enterprise. Aesthetic ethnography requires this relationship to be articulated in order to achieve empathy for the subjects. Furthermore the notion of backward reflexivity implies that the researcher is actively present to the site continually re-evaluating the meanings of events and statements.

In what follows I describe my findings within the three-movement schema as an exploration of the aesthetic research method. The titles I have given – *Beguiling Theatre*, *Polyphonic Interaction* and *Observing the Play Impulse* – indicate the research focus for each movement.

### **First Movement: Beguiling Theatre**

An orchestra is an interesting study because most of its life is carried out in the public eye and the degree to which it succeeds in performance can determine how it functions in private. This public face, though, is not confined just to concert performances and rehearsals but also includes meetings of stakeholders such as advisory committees and friends.

My initial reactions were confusion and disappointment. I was inspired by the orchestra's performances but their off-stage meetings left me feeling confused, dismayed and at times disgusted. This seemed to me to be a very unhappy group, ideologically divided about how they should govern themselves. Their intense conflict caused me to question how they could take their off-stage lack of civility into a concert, and play as a cohesive band. Clues to their deep dysfunction were played out in their Annual General Meetings.

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) is an occasion primarily designed to allow heads of stakeholder groups to report to the public and, like a concert, it is a highly ritualised event. The Chairs of all the committees give prepared speeches and the audited financial report for the previous year is tabled. Musical items are offered and a sumptuous supper concludes the evening. Therefore the dramatic setting of the AGM provides a context within which to understand the developments in the intervening months. Although my research started around the time of the 2003 AGM, I begin this narrative with the next 2004 AGM, because this second meeting set the scene for the preceding events.

One of the most striking differences from the 2003 AGM was the almost complete absence of the term *family* in the 2004 meeting. Many of the speakers during the 2003 AGM spoke of the 'Symphony family' as a way of describing the ups and downs of life in the orchestra. In the 2004 meeting, there was a sense that a whole new regime was in operation, a sense that

the orchestra family had become so dysfunctional that an alternative way of describing the enterprise needed to be found.

The Chairman of the Board of Director's report in 2004 was an opportunity to hear of this new state of affairs and contained the official version of the reasons for the governance restructure. His report outlined the reasons why changes were necessary from a managerial, artistic and financial point of view and addressed issues of orchestral governance. He claimed that the changes were made so that the musicians would be free to focus on their artistic role and leave managerial tasks to better qualified staff.

He noted that the orchestra had returned to a 'more conventional hierarchical governance structure' necessitated by the needs of a 'modern and professional orchestra in a changing commercial environment where the standards of governance [had] been raised.' Thus commercial realities mixed with tried-and-true hierarchical management systems provided a more secure operating environment. In the body of his speech he discussed the financial deficit as a key reason for making these changes: It had become a matter of change or die.

He went on to explore the recent history of the orchestra through the language of emancipation. The musicians had been beset with 'trials and tribulations' but were now 'free to pursue their musical careers.' Musicians are, after all, 'free spirits' who need to be 'unshackled from and unburdened by the day to day operation' and the new structure would allow them to perform with 'freedom, passion and excellence.' It seemed that the rhetorical intent of the Chairman's speech was to communicate to all the stakeholders, and more specifically representatives of funding agencies, that the structural problems within the orchestra had been successfully attended to.

The 2004 Chairman's speech provoked me to think back over the Orchestra's history. Since its inception in 1980 the City Symphony operated as a cooperative. My research interest surrounded how these musicians managed their business affairs beginning with the question: 'How does musical creativity translate from musical performance into management practice?'

Like other orchestras, the City Symphony in rehearsal and performance adheres to universally accepted mores. In spite of its cooperative management style, on stage strict chain-of-command protocols operate, and even though section principals might on occasions speak directly with the conductor, no rank-and-file musician has this right. So, both in rehearsal and performance, orchestral functions are highly ritualised and every element of a



concert has its prescribed custom. Dress-code, arrival on stage, the order of the programme items, the way of acknowledging applause are determined by long established rituals that are observed world-wide.

The formal context within which the orchestra operates, then, are pure theatre. A concert is a dramatic event for public consumption and from beginning to end, the players presents themselves as a highly polished, united team, all striving for artistic excellence. Audiences too, collude with the drama. Absolute silence during a performance, not clapping between movements, yet offering ecstatic outbursts of applause at the end of pieces, are all behaviours required to make a concert fully participatory.

What captivated me about the City Symphony, though, was the disruption of these dramatic power relations off-stage. There appeared to be a confusion of roles, because an elected musician was Secretary of the cooperative society, meaning that on-stage he was a rank-and-file musician, but off-stage was the CEO of the ensemble. I became curious to see how the musicians coped with the dualities inherent in this paradoxical structure and to observe the translation, if any, of practices from the concert platform to the manager's desk.

First indications were that in spite of the united intensity of the concert platform, a different scenario was being played off-stage. The disjunction became obvious on the night of the 2003 AGM. Over supper one musician said he had stayed with the orchestra because; 'The thrill and sheer excitement that playing in an orchestra can generate is something that is difficult to replicate.' This seemed to me to encapsulate both my experience of orchestral playing and present a succinct description of creativity. Yet other players bluntly stated: 'Orchestras are not creative. If you want to see creativity, come to my chamber group rehearsal, but you won't find creativity around here!'

This fob-off intrigued me. Beneath the Arcadian creative ideal I discovered an orchestra ridden with angst. Confirming this, several said to me that evening, 'Were you at this afternoon's [Orchestra] meeting?' and 'You should've been at this afternoon's meeting; that would've been an eye-opener!'

That afternoon a governance review had been announced resulting in an acrimonious meeting where players vehemently aired opposing opinions. Off-stage the orchestra was engaged in a war of attrition with two polarized groups vying for dominance: one, dubbed the Traditionalists wanting to keep the cooperative structure intact and the other, the self-styled

Progressives pressing for change to a corporate style of governance. In the months following the 2003 AGM I questioned what lay behind this disaffection and conflict.

The first movement of emotional attachment of aesthetic research sees the researcher developing a self-centred insatiable appetite for more, and this was certainly the case of my research with the City Symphony. Curiosity and admiration for this group participating in the noble task of performing orchestral music characterised my first reactions, but overall I felt a sense of confusion: How could a conflicted group like this perform such sublime music? The lack of reference to ‘family’ in the 2004 AGM was a cue to the changing climate. Furthermore the Chairman’s speech promising the musicians emancipation sounded hollow and defensive, and I wondered what lay beneath my sense of dissonance.

### **Second Movement: Polyphonic Interaction**

The aesthetic ethnographic method turns from curiosity to critical engagement where various narrative strands are analysed. This stage of cognitive detachment represents withdrawal, with the researcher stepping back to critically examine presenting issues. Withdrawal, though, does not mean disengagement, rather the aesthetic ethnographer moves from emotional attachment to cognitive detachment *in situ*, thereby analysing events as they occur rather than seeing them in isolation. The researcher’s focus turns to the subjects and how they understand and interpret events and asks of research subjects, ‘What do *you* see and hear?’ Therefore during this movement, the aesthetic ethnographer attends to both the *categorical structures* of the enterprise by examining the sensations and perceptions of the subjects as well as the *qualitative harmony structures* around which these elements cohere. Again, the skills of backward reflexivity and forward anticipation inform the unfolding analysis.

Underlying the intent of the chairman’s report was growing frustration among the musicians throughout the previous year. Members of the self-styled Progressive group expressed frustration around artistic control. For instance, they considered that policies where probationary players were reviewed for tenure were not being adhered to, resulting in trialling players being kept in suspension by a combination of sloppy administration and competing interests in the orchestra. One player had adamantly exclaimed to me; ‘We need a policeman! A policeman!’ He maintained that the Traditionalists were impairing progress

and an empowered Music Director and Board would provide higher levels of control and accountability necessary to confront these artistic issues.

The Traditionalists also expressed frustration. At a Society meeting in May 2003, the business advisers called in to guide governance changes reported that funding agencies were reticent about increasing grants and one proclaimed that they would ‘take half a million dollars with us today’ if the orchestra did not adopt the recommended changes. Furthermore he stated: ‘Either accept the changes willingly or they will be forced on you.’ As a result the Traditionalists felt that the advisers were using strong-arm tactics. One player complained of being bullied, threatened and lied to about the scope of the proposed changes, whilst another talked about feeling ‘put down’ by the advisers.

In order to discover the relationship between my observations and the issues being reported, in interviews I asked, ‘If this organisation was a piece of music, how would it sound?’ The most common response was, ‘It’s a cacophony!’ Beyond this musical image of incoherence, musicians reported feeling distressed and even depressed about this state of affairs. People being ‘out of time’ with each and unable to achieve the kind of ensemble they strive for on-stage was commonly reported.

This inability to act in a unified manner was put to the test when the vote to change the structure was finally taken in July 2003. Many of those opposed to the new scenario, abstained from voting, and that evening took the unprecedented step of failing to turn up to a concert. Not surprisingly this resistance was reflected in a sudden decline in performance standards. A review of a concert from August 2003 included the cutting remark that the string players ‘came up with some of the smudgiest violin lines I have heard this side of a school orchestra’ whilst another in September 2003 contained the comment, ‘poor intonation in the strings started to irritate and remained an irritation.’

In the face of the need to lift performance standards, and emboldened by the higher level of power the new structure offered, the Music Director issued letters of warning to three under-performing musicians. This outraged the Traditionalists who considered the letters an attack on all their employment rights. Although two of the musicians made satisfactory improvements, one took legal action thereby distracting the newly formed Board from its prime task of sourcing new revenue streams. So, facing the risk of collapse, in July 2004 the

new constitution was suspended and a new executive Chairperson was appointed to arrest the orchestra's decline.

Yet in spite of this increasing and seemingly irresolvable conflict, in 2004 the orchestra experienced resurgence in performing levels with a reviewer noting in March of that year that, 'the City Symphony played right up to the wire, eager to please, united in the effort.' Beyond the conflict and competing interests, the players continually sought for the sublime performance that transcended their daily interactions. Even when conflicts were at their worst, musicians still insisted that the music was first and that when they went on stage, they left their angst in the Green Room.

### **Third Movement: Observing The Play Impulse**

The third movement in aesthetic ethnography is to look beyond narrative analysis and observe the big picture as now, an informed insider. This stage of aesthetic ethnography considers the interface between the researcher's insights and those of the research subjects and asks, 'What do *we* see and hear?' This proved to be the most difficult part of the process. Some of the musicians had become wary about a researcher 'snooping around' and pressed for my access to be rescinded. This meant that I was reliant on discussions with administrators and managers and second-hand reports to keep track of developments.

Although limited in scope, conversations with the orchestra's institutional leaders proved a rich resource. The General Manager (GM) participated with me in an extensive analysis of the history of the enterprise. The GM drew on a wall chart a number of critical incidents that lead to the breakdown of relationships and together, with the help of a former GM, we theorised about the reasons why the orchestra had reached its impasse.

For me the key question revolved around the ensemble maintaining its capability to perform in the face of internal strife. Creativity within any enterprise and in an orchestra in particular requires both individual pursuit and collective endeavour, carried out in an affirming and active environment; a state where both form and content comprise a creative synergy.

An interview with one of the CSO's conductors encapsulated how this works in performance. He spoke of times when an instrumental section 'offers something different and interesting' that the conductor might not have considered, yet the musical idea is so compelling and creative that he would integrate that into his reading of the work. Therefore in spite of the

prescribed nature of orchestral music, there is still room for surprising idiosyncratic expressions that enhance a work.

Yet behind the scenes, the City Symphony had difficulty in translating this performance ideal into management practice. The Chairman's report to the 2004 AGM contained the promise of a new beginning for the orchestra by offering a structure that would enable the musicians to engage in their creative task as well as clearing up the managerial problems that existed in the old cooperative structure. However the new constitution was a dramatic failure, and instead of being revitalised, the orchestra became engaged in a nihilistic internecine war that threatened to scuttle the enterprise. But was the struggle merely between the Traditionalists and Progressives, or were there bigger issues at stake?

The underlying motivation of those advising the orchestra was that the structure needed to change. Their expectation was that right structure would set the orchestra on a path to recovery and prosperity. However, attention was not given to the kinds of qualities needed for the orchestra to enlarge its repertoire of creative behaviours. The Chairman's speech promised the musicians freedom, though not within an environment of affirmation and action necessary for creative endeavour to flourish.

As Nietzsche observed, in Ancient Greece the tragic chorus was denied its creative power by the Socratic turn to logic and science (Nietzsche, 1871/1956). The problem with privileging rationality was that the chorus was denied its right to speak, thereby inhibiting social action. The Greek tragedy was grounded in political action and, Alan Singer notes this aesthetic was the site for human agency (Singer, 2003, p. 14). So in spite of the promise of emancipation in the 2004 Chairman's report, and notwithstanding their dysfunctionality, removing the musicians from the political process robbed them of the opportunity to locate the essence of their creativity.

Becoming corporate had its advantages. It was hoped that with a structure in place that gave Board representation to external stakeholders, more secure funding could be sourced. It was believed that private donors would have greater confidence that their monies were being well cared for. In the process, though, the orchestra ran the risk of losing the kind of play impulse necessary to keep it in its creative space.

## CONCLUSION

As a research tool, the aesthetic lens offers a way of examining organisations that attends to process and symbol as well as the ephemeral and ineffable. In the aesthetic ethnographic method I have outlined an approach that attends to the various voices within an enterprise. These were seen as interacting polyphonically rather than being reduced to a dominant idea.

The music of organisations can sound on first hearing to be a cacophony of noises that have little unity. Ethnography in general, and the aesthetic approach in particular, offers time for the researcher to distil the noise into a polyphony that is coherent without the need to reduce sometimes contradictory themes into a single idea.

Further, aesthetic ethnography provides space for analysis within an artistic frame. In this regard Ingarden claims that all acts of human creation can be analysed aesthetically. Thus, an organisation can be viewed using similar parameters as a piece of music. In response I have distilled Ingarden's phenomenology of music, choosing *movement* over *moment* to show how idiosyncratic incidents relate together as they are viewed in retrospect. Backward reflexivity, then, is an important skill that researchers can deploy as a means of exploring responses to events as they occur.

Explorations of the City Symphony Orchestra show that what is immediately visible and known is just one manifestation of an organisation's identity. While some of the off-stage struggles were reflected in concert performance, much of the inner workings were kept from public exposure. What aesthetic ethnography offers is a framework within which both on- and off-stage sensations and perceptions can be tracked and analysed.

The methodology I have proposed is only developmental and further refining needs to be done. For instance the third movement of integrated synthesis needs more exploration especially in the relationship between methodology and theory-building. Further, the researcher-researched aesthetic relationship can be investigated in more detail to discover the generative ability of shared sensations and perceptions. Aesthetic engagement can result in the transformation of both the individual actors and the aesthetician, and this transformation may hold the key to organisational revitalisation. This methodology could therefore be strengthened as both theorists and business practitioners become more alert to their aesthetic sensibilities.

Aesthetic ethnography can provoke new ways of examining enterprises by avoiding being captured by some elements in preference to others. Beyond research practice, perhaps as organisations become more aesthetically attuned, there may more beauty and less blood on the floor.

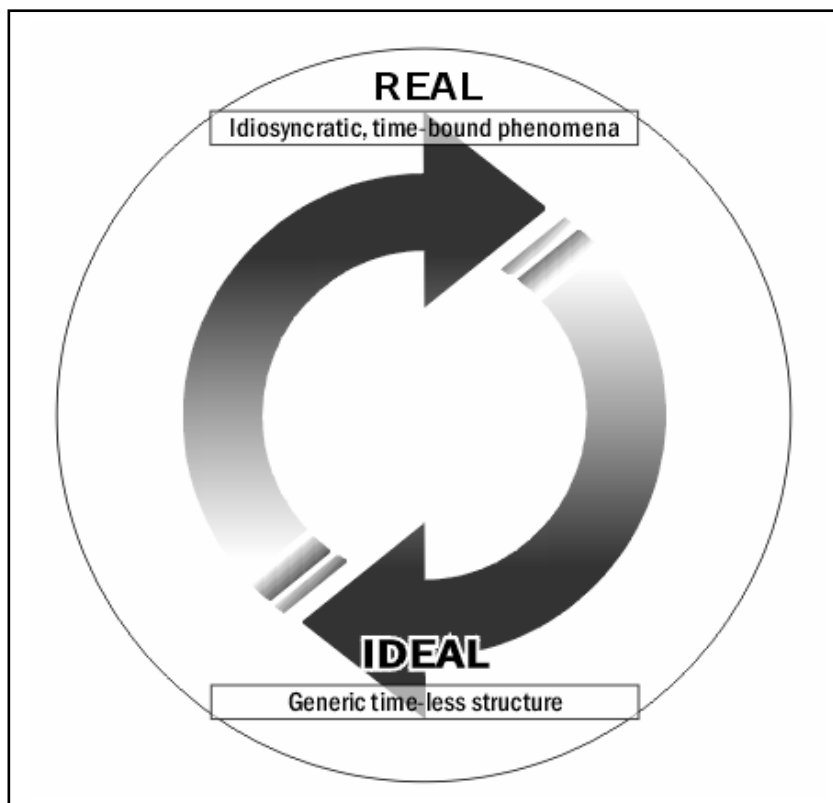
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**Figure 1: The Continuous Interplay between the Real and the Ideal**

# The music of organising: Exploring aesthetic ethnography

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